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Report Documentation Page			Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188		
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1. REPORT DATE <b>MAR 2004</b>		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED <b>00-00-2004 to 00-00-2004</b>	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>The Effect of Terrorist Attacks in Spain on Transatlantic Cooperation in the War on Terror</b>			5a. CONTRACT NUMBER		
			5b. GRANT NUMBER		
			5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER		
6. AUTHOR(S)			5d. PROJECT NUMBER		
			5e. TASK NUMBER		
			5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER		
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>Rand Corporation,1776 Main Street,PO Box 2138,Santa Monica,CA,90407-2138</b>			8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER		
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)			10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)		
			11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)		
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES <b>The original document contains color images.</b>					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>7</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			

# TESTIMONY

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## The Effect of Terrorist Attacks in Spain on Transatlantic Cooperation in the War on Terror

JAMES DOBBINS

CT-225

March 2004

Testimony presented to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations  
Subcommittee on European Affairs on March 31, 2004

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Published 2004 by the RAND Corporation  
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1200 South Hayes Street, Arlington, VA 22202-5050  
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**Statement of James Dobbins<sup>1</sup>**  
**Director of RAND International Security and Defense Policy Center**

**Before the Committee on Foreign Relations**  
**Subcommittee on European Affairs**  
**United States Senate**

**March 31, 2004**

The recent terror attacks in Spain have exacerbated transatlantic differences over Iraq and the war on terror.

Before expanding on of those differences, however, it is worth emphasizing the areas of continued agreement.

There are no apparent differences between the US and Europe over the nature of the terrorist threat or the need for closer cooperation, including transatlantic cooperation to counter it.

There are no apparent differences between the US and Europe over the need to help construct a democratic, prosperous and peaceful Iraq, nor do there appear to be any differences about how to do so from this time forward.

There are transatlantic differences over the role of Iraq in the war on terror, and over the role of war in the war on terror. The recent terrorist attacks in Spain do not seem to have changed European opinions on these issues so much as raised their prominence.

Some European governments and most European people believed, even prior to the Spanish attacks, that the invasion of Iraq has contributed negatively to the war on terror by exposing American and allied military and civil personnel to terrorist attack, by radicalizing public opinion throughout much of the Moslem world, by increasing

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recruitment to extremist organizations and by diverting resources from other tasks, including the stabilization of Afghanistan. Following the recent attacks in Spain, some Europeans may now believe that the intervention in Iraq has also increased the likelihood of terrorist attacks in European states that supported that action.

Striking at states that support terrorism has been integral to the Bush Administration's post 9/11 strategy. Saddam's may not have been the most complicit of such regime, but it was the most vulnerable. American action in Iraq, following so closely on its invasion of Afghanistan, does seem to have given pause to other states, such as Syria, Iran or Libya, which have shown a predilection toward terrorist methods in the past. Recent Iranian and Libyan concessions regarding their respective nuclear programs give substance to this linkage and support to the American Administration's claim that preemptive action in Iraq could have a deterrent effect elsewhere.

This deterrent effect may be undermined, however, by the difficulties the United States has encountered in reconstructing both Iraq and Afghanistan and the failure to establish a secure environment in either place. In the short term, US forces are so heavily committed to these efforts as to make major new commitments elsewhere unlikely. In the long term regime change as a response to state supported terrorism will remain a credible strategy only if the United States demonstrates the capacity not just to take down odious regimes, but to build up better ones in their place

If some European governments and most European people differ with the US Administration over the wisdom of invading Iraq, there are no discernible differences about where to go from here. Whatever its original predilections, the US Administration seems, in recent months, to have largely embraced the approach to Iraqi reconstruction advocated by its harshest European critics. Thus the US is thus now seeking to expand the UN and NATO roles in post-occupation Iraq, and to return sovereign power to an Iraqi government as quickly as one can be formed. Indeed the US Administration appears to envisage exactly the role for the United Nations in post-occupation Iraq that the new Spanish government says it requires to keep Spanish troops there. Future limits on the multilateralization of Iraq's reconstruction seem more likely to result from UN and

European reluctance to become more heavily involved than residual unilateralist impulses on the part of the US Administration.

There are, as noted, important differences between the US and Europe over the role of war in the war on terrorism. Most Europeans see counter-terrorism as a primarily law enforcement, judicial, intelligence, diplomatic and financial activity, with only a limited role for conventional military force. They believe most terrorists live in and operate out of essentially uninvadeable states. They are unconvinced that terrorist organizations like Al Qaeda rely on state support. They do not believe that Saddam's regime was actively supporting terrorist activity against Europe or the United States. They do not feel that Saddam Hussein was likely to supply WMD to terrorist organizations, even had he any such weapons to supply. They supported the invasion of Afghanistan, but not Iraq.

The 9/11 attacks have increased European concerns over WMD proliferation, and the prospect for diversion into terrorist hands. Europeans are not willing to sanction unilateral preemption, however, at least not in the absence of an immanent threat. Europeans are open to the concept of multilateral preemption, that is to say common action, including common military action against immanent threats. Many Europeans could also be brought to accept the need for unilateral preemptive action, but only in cases where the threat proved, in fact, to have been immanent.

Transatlantic differences over Iraq are, as noted, more retrospective than prospective. The dynamics of the American presidential campaign make it difficult, however, to put these past differences behind us. At least for the next six months the US Administration is going to feel the need to proclaim, pretty much on a daily basis, that its original decision to intervene in Iraq was a good idea. This will lead many Europeans to periodically restate their view that it was not. At this stage, however, this retrospective argument is predominantly a domestic one, albeit with a transatlantic echo. After November, whichever candidate is elected to the American presidency, transatlantic recriminations are likely to further fade, while the focus turns to future steps.

As long as American forces remain heavily tied down in Iraq, the transatlantic debate over preemption as a doctrine with applicability to future cases will remain somewhat

academic. Such differences are unlikely to curtail counter-terrorism cooperation in the law enforcement, judicial, intelligence diplomatic and financial arenas. Nevertheless, failure to agree upon the role of war in the war on terror will complicate the ability to forge a common US European strategy. Certainly it will remain impossible to base common action between the United States and Europe upon a doctrine of unilateral preemption. Continued enunciation of such a doctrine will make it more difficult to marshal European support and secure European participation in those instances where military action becomes the last best option. Whatever preemptions virtues as a guide to action, it is probably an option that best remains unenunciated until such action becomes an unavoidable necessity.